Sengupta is First Hindu Woman to Trek the Arctic to Magnetic North Pole

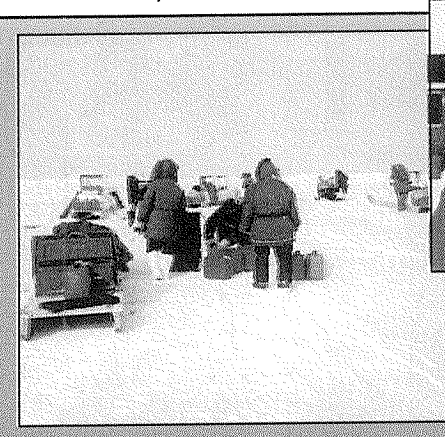
By Preety Sengupta

I consider myself a writer by vocation, and a traveller by religion. Places and people are what I believe in. By 1989 I had been to over 70 countries, and all seven continents, including Antarctica. After that I started thinking of the high Arctic, and set my heart on going to the magnetic North Pole. For me, as a Hindu, each place of beauty is a pilgrimage—from the Ganga shores at Haridwar to the sublime, snowy oceanic region of the High Arctic.

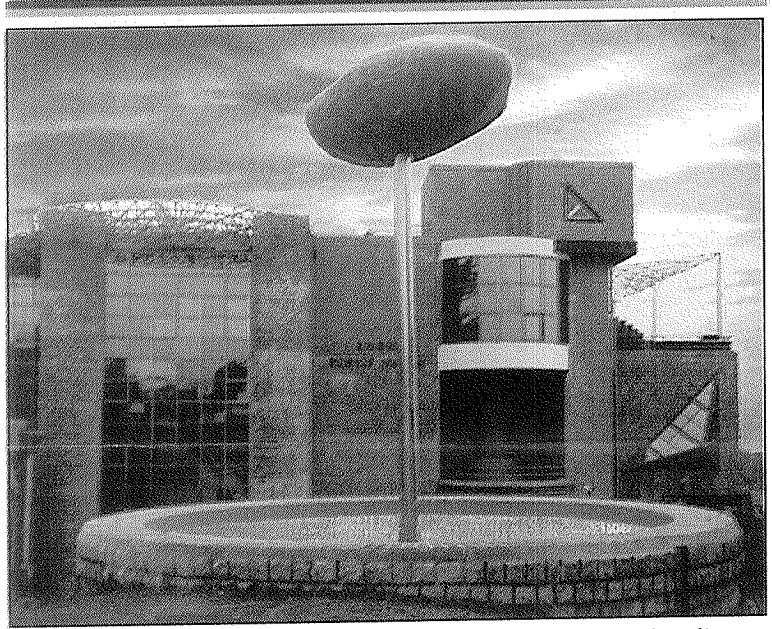
About two weeks before I was to head northward (April '92), my husband presented me with a surprise gift of fifty freshly-cut red rose buds. Out of love and respect for my husband, I decided to take five roses with me all the way to the Pole. I put the five stems in five plastic tubes filled with some water. I also took a small statue of Ganesh, the Remover of Obstacles. A friend from India had given me a Shiva bracelet, which I also carried with me for good luck. With these icons, I would establish a temple of sorts at the Pole—however small, however temporary.

From the Arctic hamlet of Resolute in the Northwest Territories of Northern Canada, our expedition commenced in sledges pulled by snowmobiles. We were a small international group made up of myself, a German, a Swiss, an Irishman and a British citizen of Hong Kong-Chinese origin. I was the only woman in the group, which included five drivers. I got my own tent, which made the journey even more extraordinary for me. I was glad that no polar bears came sniffing at our camp.

In the High Arctic the days were bright, and so were the nights. We waited to see the midnight sun, and even saw one "near-sunset" with lovely pink and mauve in the sky. It was extremely cold, but entirely white all around, and beautiful. It was like a miracle to be journeying, walking, sleeping on the very ocean. On the fifth day we finally reached the Magnetic Polar Zone. When we went up to a polar point, we put up the sign of the pole and hung flags of our countries. On a slab made of freshest snow I placed the Ganesh and the bracelet, scattered the dry petals of my roses and felt at peace. This was perfection. This was a place without clutter and clamor and conflict. That was a domain where Gods can be enthroned with devotion. I offered my silent prayers with folded palms and moist eyes to my deities—many emotions surging in my heart. My dream was fulfilled. I also had become the first Indian woman (perhaps traveller and a Hindu as well) to have reached the Magnetic North Pole.



Birla Science Center Claims Hard Proof of Vedic Space-Voyaging



High-tech ancient Hindus: Birla Science Museum in Hyderabad, India.

Reported by C.S.H.N. Murthy

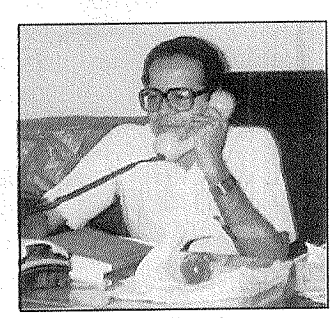
In late October, 1992, the US space shuttle Columbia was testing gold alloys in a metal furnace 160 miles up in space. According to Dr. Siddharth—astrophysicist and head of the Birla Science Center in Hyderabad, India—Hindus thousands of years ago were manufacturing and piloting space-faring vehicles with materials and gear more advanced than today's engineering.

The assertion of ancient Indian flying and space technology isn't new. But it has never gained high altitude in the atmosphere of science credibility. However, the Birla Science Center was created to investigate technologies and theories buried in ancient Indian literature, mainly science *shastras*, "manuals." Siddharth and his colleagues at the Birla Science Center and Birla Institute of Scientific Research cooked up materials of alleged millennia-old Hindu technology in their lab furnaces: exotic alloys, glasses and ceramics. Dr. Siddharth confidently told HINDUISM TODAY these materials suggest the early Hindus matched today's "remote imaging and sensing technology or even excelled it in certain respects."

The shastra literature that the Birla team studied for these technologies is not exactly ancient, or at least the manuscript isn't. From 1904 to 1908 the guru of renowned Sanskrit scholar Pandit T. Subbaraya Sastri dictated out of his meditations a series of science shastras—all in Sanskrit so arcane it was nearly in code. Prominent among these was one called *Vimana Prakaranam*, purportedly written by Maharishi Bharadwaj thousands of years ago. Sanskrit scholars were put on the detective job of helping to decipher the text.

When the *Vimana* alloys were created, Dr. M.C. Ganokar of the Birla labs compared them to an international alloy table and discovered that none were on it. They were novel in combination and properties. Twenty specimens were produced. One of the alloys—lead and leadoxide—was tested by Dr. Robert Anderson of San Jose State University who beamed laser light into it. It startled him by completely absorbing the light. Dr. Ganokar guesses this was used as a protective coating for space craft. Dr. Siddharth said the *Vimana* shastra describes a variety of air and spacecraft, and 32 different instruments.

Other India-based institutes are aiding the research. Dr. Siddharth estimates it will take ten years for a coordinated effort to recreate an actual spacecraft design.



Birla's Dr. Siddharth.

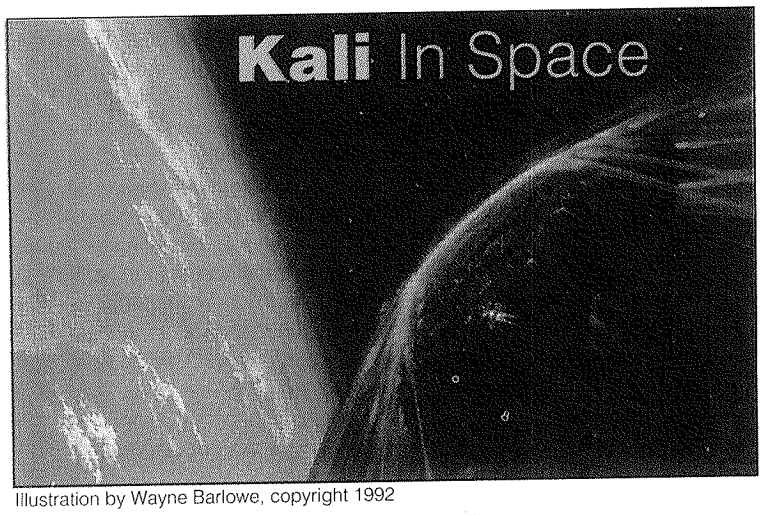
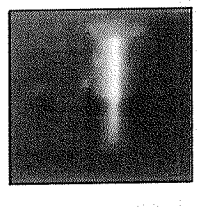


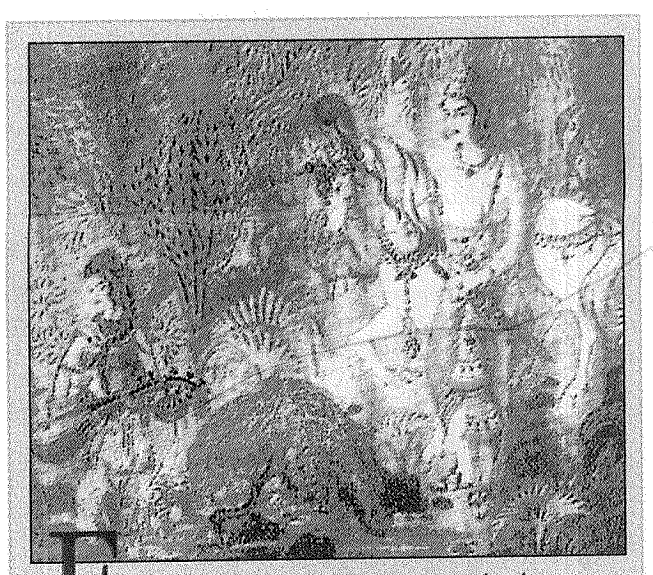
Illustration by Wayne Barlowe, copyright 1992

Time magazine's "Beyond the Year 2000" special issue featured a fiction piece by famed sci-fi writer and futurologist Arthur C. Clarke (who lives in Sri Lanka). Clarke has been warning that Earth will probably be hit by an asteroid in the future. So his story features 23rd century Earth imperiled by a city-park size asteroid named Kali, after the Hindu goddess. A new, mushrooming sect called Chrislam spawns a fanatic splinter group. In deep space, an orbital tug—captained by Robert Singh—is assigned to push the asteroid a few degrees off its Earth-bound course after a giant engine built on Kali has its fuel tanks ruptured by Chrislam sabotage. Does Kali miss? We won't tell.

A few weeks after *Time*'s publication, astronomers predicted that the comet Swift-Tuttle could slam into Earth in the year 2126. The impact would be greater than the asteroid collision that triggered the dinosaur extinction.



New alloys: at left a blue glass ingot with magnetic properties, composed of soft ferrite ; at right a metal alloy of copper, lead and zinc.



FORGED ART

Shady art dealers in metropolitan India are canvasing big business in fake Indian masterworks. The above painting is a good copy of a work by Ganganendranath Tagore, brother to Rabindranath Tagore. It is from the so-called old Bengal School. Forgeries of this school have been saturating the art market in Calcutta, and even included a copy of a Japanese painter's landscape—he was inspired by a visit to Tagore's Shantiniketan ashram. The boom in art forging appears to have started in the mid 1980's, and is now shepherded by former art institute employees. The forgers themselves are drawn from art college graduates. Some gallery owners—trying to avoid fakes and a crumbling reputation—are carrying contemporary art exclusively. The arrival of Sotheby's in India is expected to introduce standards and safeguards into India's art market.

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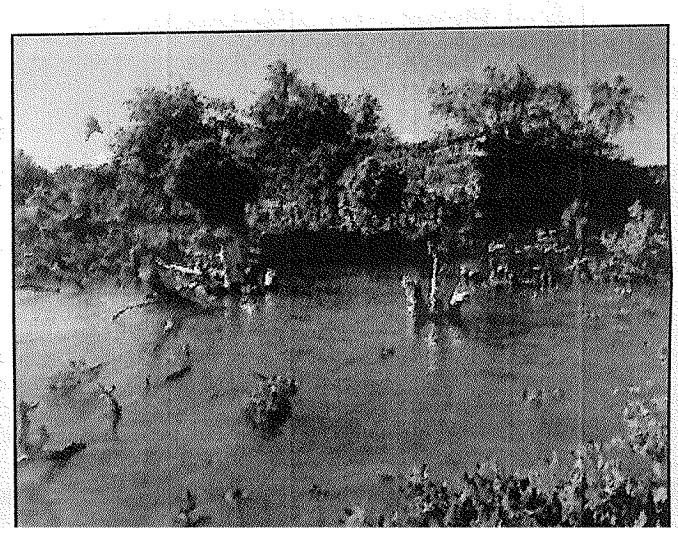

Micronesia Mystery

On a tiny island of Micronesia lies one of archeology's great mysteries—the ruins of the ancient canal city of Nan Madol (500 CE), home of 1,000 royal and elite islanders. It is built of uncut stones weighing up to 50 tons on artificial islets bearing residences, meeting houses, a palace, tombs, temples, baths and artificial ponds. Basalt columns laid end-to-end extend half a mile into the lagoon. Twelve vertical columns found planted 2,100 feet below the ocean's surface may be man-made. Nan Madol disappeared in the 17th century. According to archeologist Prof. Ayres (University of Oregon) the intricacy of design suggests external cultural influence,

Illustration courtesy of Hindu Today